

Lithuania Votes Independence

Legislature Seeks Soviet Secession; Non-Communist Is Elected President

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., March 11—The Lithuanian legislature today declared the republic independent of the Soviet Union and elected a non-Communist as head of state.

The declaration of independence, in which the Baltic state also changed its name from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania to the Republic of Lithuania, represented the most serious political and legal threat ever made by one of the Soviet Union's 15 constituent republics against Moscow's control.

With today's unanimous vote, Lithuania—which first won independence in 1918, but was annexed by Moscow in 1940 under a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany—demanded immediate negotiations with the Kremlin to work out legal and economic procedures for secession.

Lithuanians said they were not so much declaring independence as

reestablishing sovereignty after 50 years of illegal occupation by the Soviet Union. The legislation established a temporary constitution, based mainly on the present legal structure, until a new constitution can be drafted and enacted into law.

"We are not asking anyone's permission whether we should take this step. We are acting on our own will, according to the dictates of our own consciences," said the new Lithuanian president, Vytautas Landsbergis, a 57-year-old musicologist who helped found the independence movement Sajudis less than two years ago. "Our duty now is to make a reality of the expectations we have created."

The Lithuanian legislature, which was voted into office last month in multi-party elections, also drafted an appeal to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev asking him to withdraw all Red Army troops and KGB security forces from the republic's territory. One legislator

said Lithuania would "no longer tolerate the rule of an empire."

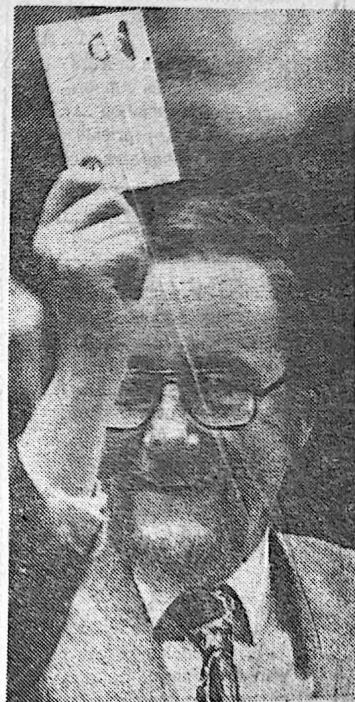
Gorbachev has steadily retreated on the question of Lithuanian independence. Nevertheless, according to Lithuanian officials, the Soviet leader raised new obstacles to such move in private meetings last week by suggesting that the republic would have to pay \$34 billion in hard currency as part of any final secession agreement.

Although Lithuanians have expressed hopes of genuine independence in a year or two, Gorbachev has drafted a law on secession procedures that could draw the process out five years or more.

Lithuanian legislators said they decided to call today's session immediately after Saturday's runoff elections in hopes that Gorbachev would not be able to move first to slow the secession process.

Gorbachev is expected to win greater executive powers as Soviet president at a special session this week of the Congress of People's Deputies, the nation's highest leg-

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VYTAUTAS LANDSBERGIS
... "we are not asking permission"

■ Gorbachev rejects name change for Soviet Communist Party. Page A10

islative body. Many of the Lithuanian deputies to the congress said they would not take part in the session in Moscow but would continue their efforts in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital.

Many Lithuanian legislators say they expect difficult negotiations with Gorbachev and possibly severe economic pressure from Moscow in months ahead. "The pressure is going to be tremendous, but at this point our political interests must come before our economic fears," said Kazimera Prunskiene, a Sajudis leader and economist who was elected prime minister.

Landsbergis said he was "not so naive" as to believe that today's declaration of independence had severed all of Lithuania's ties with Moscow. Instead, he said, the act was intended to establish Lithuania's "legal position and popular will" along with the republic's ability to write its own laws and conduct its own foreign policy.

Nearly all questions of economic relations with the Soviet Union—including taxes, state enterprises and currency issues—will have to be resolved in future negotiations with Moscow, Landsbergis said.

One of Gorbachev's Kremlin colleagues, Rasik Nishanov, telephoned Landsbergis shortly before the start of today's session and asked him to delay any vote on independence. Landsbergis refused.

In symbolic gestures, Lithuanian legislators sought to emphasize the depth of their intentions and their disdain for Soviet power. After an early vote established a new state symbol for Lithuania, a yellow curtain dropped behind the podium to cover the traditional Soviet insignia declaring "Proletarians of the World Unite."

And when the independence measure passed just before midnight by a vote of 124 to 0 with six abstentions, the public address system played the Lithuanian national anthem and a red, yellow and green flag was hoisted where the Soviet hammer and sickle had been.

After the votes were counted, there were cries from the floor of "Estonia will now be free" and "Latvia will now be free." Independence campaigns similar to the Lithuanian movement are underway in both of these Baltic states.

Algirdas Brazauskas, the Lithuanian Communist Party chief defeated by Landsbergis in today's election for head of state, said he expected the Lithuanian drive for independence to have a "contagious" effect on other republics, but

would not necessarily lead to the fall of the Soviet Union. "I don't think such an enormous state can collapse so easily," he said.

Some deputies complained that the legislature was moving too quickly and should have taken a few more days to work out the language of the declaration. Others said privately that they considered the measure dangerous and would have preferred to vote against it, but they added that they could not vote against it because of strong popular support for independence.

The three-paragraph declaration, called "The Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Government," read in part: "Expressing the will of the people, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Lithuania resolved and solemnly declared the restoration of the sovereign right of the Lithuanian government which was encroached upon by a foreign power in 1940.

"The act of the Lithuanian parliament on independence from Feb. 16, 1918, and the resolution of the parliament on the restoration of a democratic Lithuanian government was never revoked. . . . The territory of Lithuania is integral and indivisible and no other constitution is valid on its soil."

Outside the building housing the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, the republic's legislature, hundreds of people cheered in the rain as workmen used a chisel and a screwdriver to pry the Soviet seal off a wall. As the huge hammer and sickle was lowered to the sidewalk, the crowd sang patriotic songs and waved banners, including one that said, "Lithuania without Bolsheviks!"

"I am so happy because now my son will never have to serve in the Soviet army," said Irena Zmitrowicz, a young woman whose relatives were deported to Siberia shortly after the rise of Soviet power in Lithuania. Several old men, who spent years exiled from Lithuania in labor camps, watched the celebration with tears in their eyes.

Landsbergis said he expected "genuine foreign support" from the West and expressed hope that President Bush would "provide some advice to Mr. Gorbachev on the reestablishment of real Lithuanian independence."

Although the United States has recognized the Baltic states as "captive nations," Landsbergis has expressed frustration at what he calls "the hesitation in the White House." He has said he wants Bush to "overcome his fear of offending Gorbachev" and make a clear statement of recognition of an independent Republic of Lithuania. For decades,

Lithuanians have maintained legation offices in the United States and other foreign countries.

The shift in leadership from Brazauskas to Landsbergis marked the end of Communist rule in the republic. Sajudis won two-thirds of the seats in the legislature and Landsbergis won his election today by the same margin.

Landsbergis is a soft-spoken professor of music at the Vilnius Conservatory where he specializes in early 20th Century avant-garde Lithuanian composers. His family is a mixture of old Lithuanian nobility and modern intellectuals. His father fought against the Poles and Bolsheviks for independence in 1918 and the family helped to hide Jewish families during the Nazi occupation.

Lithuania was part of the czarist empire beginning in 1795. Throughout the 19th century, there were unsuccessful nationalist revolts. Both the czars and the Bolshevik leaders sent hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians into Siberian exile.

"Today marks the beginning of a new Lithuania state, democratic and free," Landsbergis said.